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PROPHETS AND PROPHECY IN NEW TESTAMENT TIMES

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Among the Hebrews of the monarchy the prophet occupied a position which has no exact analogue among the other great nations of antiquity, and of which it would be difficult to exaggerate the importance. In the Jewish commonwealth the distinction between the religious and the secular, between church and state, was not recognized; and so the prophets who proclaimed the will and purposes of Jehovah to his people played a conspicuous part in the foreign and domestic policy of the nation. The great figures among those who held the prophetic office appear among the king's ministers and advisers, or—where they are in conflict with the reigning sovereign—they take their place as the natural leaders of the people (1 Kings 19:15 ff.). The "schools of the prophets" corresponded to our modern universities or theological colleges, and among the historians who recorded the narrative of the rise and fall of Israel, prophets take a prominent place (1 Chron. 29:29; 2 Chron. 9:29; etc.). In statecraft and in literature the great names are those of prophets. But the state was a theocracy, and the Hebrew literature essentially religious, law and history no less so than the literature of philosophy, ritual, or devotion. The "prophetic narrative" is the oldest collection of Hebrew annals which has come down to us. The Psalms breathe the prophetic spirit in every page. But the prophet was more than annalist or statesman or hymn-writer. He was the revealer of God's purposes and the exponent of his laws. Above all else, he was a preacher of righteousness. And, inasmuch as his title to be heard and obeyed rested on his claim to a direct inspiration from Jehovah, it was entirely independent of official appointment or of caste privilege or of kingly favor. "The word of the Lord came to me, saying—," that was his sole and sufficient commission. In this, his position was in sharp contrast, on the one hand, with that of a mere statesman like Ahitophel, or, on the other, with that of the priests who necessarily

belonged to a particular family, and for whom strict rules were laid down as to the conduct of their duties. He might, indeed, lead forth the people to battle, as did Samuel, or he might be a statesman, as was Isaiah, or a priest, like Jeremiah; but the prophetic calling had no more necessary connection with the priestly office than it had with the position of commander-in-chief. On occasion, the prophet might direct the course of a campaign, or, on occasion, he might offer sacrifice. No man dare gainsay him, for the spirit of Jehovah rested upon and inspired him. But the genuine prophet was never a mere official personage, and under ordinary circumstances he would not assume the duties which fell to others to discharge, and for which they had been trained and were specially qualified.

It does not need any prolonged reflection to understand that a calling such as this was little likely to be looked upon with favor by the official classes of the nation; and in course of time, as the simplicity of the Hebrew religion began to be overlaid by minute observances of ritual and by elaborate commentaries on the inspired law, the influence of the prophets of Israel began to wane. Not only is Malachi the last of the prophets whose writings were included in the canon; but we hear little of them after the return from the captivity and the establishment of the Roman sway. The Maccabean age did not produce prophets, although the need of a "faithful prophet" who should lead the people was keenly felt (1 Macc. 4:46; 9:27; 14:41). The rabbis took their place as the teachers, the scribes as the annalists, of the nation; and by the time of our Lord the priests had gained such a measure of ascendancy in ecclesiastical matters that a prophet who attempted to interfere with their methods of discharging their sacred office would have been treated with scorn, if not with legal penalties. The prophetic calling was in abeyance in the days of the Herods.

Yet the idea of the sanctity of a prophet's mission had never quite died out among the Jewish race; and the extraordinary influence which the preaching of John the Baptist exercised over the minds of the people was entirely in accordance with their historic traditions. "There went out unto him all the country of Judea and all they of Jerusalem" (Mark 1:5). Like his great predecessor, Elijah, he did not scruple to denounce the sins of those in high station, and he

suffered at the hands of Herod for his bold and uncompromising words of righteousness (Matt. 14:3, 4). Like many another prophet, he was a martyr to his message (Luke 1:47); Jerusalem had the unhappy reputation of a city that killed the prophets (Matt. 23:37). They could not live in that close atmosphere of ecclesiasticism.

But John the Baptist had achieved more than a temporary success as a popular mission-preacher. He had revived the idea, long dormant, that the prophet rather than the priest was the true revealer of God's will and purpose; and he had assured his hearers that One stronger than he (Mark 1:7) was coming after him to whom they must listen. And so when One arose in Galilee, "preaching the gospel of God" (Mark 1:14), men were prepared to listen, and it was not long before they were constrained to confess that "a great prophet is arisen among us, and that God has visited his people" (Luke 7:16). At his entry into Jerusalem the answer of the multitudes to the question, "Who is this?" was "This is the prophet, Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee" (Matt. 21:11). We must not permit ourselves to forget that it was Jesus the Prophet of Galilee who won the allegiance and the love of those who became disciples of the Christ, for, in truth, the consummation of the prophetic office in his person was one of the beliefs most firmly impressed upon the mind of the apostolic age. Peter and Stephen both appeal to the forecast of the Deuteronomic law, "A prophet shall the Lord God raise up unto you from among your brethren like unto me," as fulfilled in him whom they adored as more than a prophet (Deut. 18:15 = Acts 3:22; 7:37). And the Christ himself had promised that prophets should appear after his ascension: "Behold I send unto you prophets and wise men and scribes" (Matt. 23:34; cf. Luke 11:49).

This was one of the leading thoughts of the first Judean Christians. The prophetic office had been revived with a majesty and a power of which their forefathers had not dreamed. "Ye are the sons of the prophets," Peter said to the people at Solomon's porch (Acts 3:25). The idea of the Christ as King did not conflict with national sentiment, but their hopes as to the manner of his kingship had been rudely disturbed; and so it was not till after some little time had passed that the church began to emphasize that aspect of his person, from a more spiritual point of view than that which could be occupied by

men who were eagerly looking for the overthrow of the Roman power and the re-establishment of an independent national life. Again, the conception of the Christ as Priest, though of the deepest importance for a true understanding of the salvation which he wrought and the graces which he bestowed, was not prominently before them at the first. Throughout his whole ministry he had been, to all appearance, directly opposed to the priests, and it was their machinations which brought him to the cross. Nor was the priestly office of Messiah at all as definitely foreshadowed and portrayed in the sacred books of the Old Testament as his other titles of King and Prophet. It is not until we reach the epistle to the Hebrews that this great Christian idea is unfolded and explained. It was Jesus the Prophet who mastered the Galilean peasants; and that this Jesus was the Christ, the servant of Jehovah of whom the ancient Scriptures had spoken, was the main thought of the first preachers of Christianity. In him the prophetic calling had reached its highest; by him it had been demonstrated, as never before, that priests are not the sole ministers of divine grace, but that the prophet whom they despise and persecute may be more truly God's messenger than they.

The inevitable effect of this Christology was a recrudescence of the prophetic calling. The first followers of the Christ had not ceased to be Jews, and yet they had ceased to have any confidence in the accredited ecclesiastical authorities of the nation. It was a thing entirely natural that they should find in a revival of one of the most ancient and sacred of their national callings that source of authoritative teaching which is essential to the life of any religious community. Their attachment to Jewish habits and institutions is apparent on every page of the early chapters of the Acts. They did not abandon the temple services, and they still observed the hours of prayer (Acts 3:1); it was only after a sharp struggle with themselves that they could concede that the initiatory rite of circumcision was not essential for church membership; they took over the ancient office of presbyter or elder from the system of the synagogue. And so, too, did they hail with thankfulness the revival of the office of the prophet. The gift of prophecy was now, as of old, the free gift of the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:10); not a gift in which all men shared, but a gift by the exercise of which all the faithful might be advantaged (1 Cor. 14:4).

In one isolated instance the gift seems to have been shared in by women (Acts 21:9). Paul ranks *prophets* immediately after *apostles* and before *teachers* (1 Cor. 12:28), and he holds that the church is actually built upon the foundation of the "apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner-stone" (Eph. 2:20). The "mystery of Christ"—that his gospel was to be catholic, for gentile as for Jew—was "revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit" (Eph. 3:5).

The Christian prophets, then, like the Jewish prophets, were men whose words of exhortation were received as God's message. Like the Jewish prophets, prediction was sometimes a characteristic of their utterances, as in the case of Agabus (Acts 11:27, 28; 21:10, 11), although neither under the law nor the gospel was this the most important or conspicuous part of the prophetic function. Elijah was counted one of the greatest of the prophets; yet no messianic prediction is ascribed to him. And so in apostolic days prediction was not the main characteristic of the message of the *προφήτης*. They were, however, something more than *teachers*; there is a wide difference between a man who is master of his message and a man whose message is master of him. Certainly "the spirits of the prophets were subject to the prophets" (1 Cor. 14:32); their utterances were not mere rhapsodies or expressions of frenzied ecstasy, like the utterances of heathen oracles. But they were inspired by a spirit not altogether their own, and their words were greater than they knew.

We meet with them several times in the Acts. Prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch with the view of gaining sympathy and relief for the poorer Judean Christians during the time of the impending famine (Acts 11:27-29); here they seemed to have played much the same part that is performed in our day by an eloquent preacher who is intrusted with the delivery of a "charity" sermon. A little later among the prophets and teachers at Antioch five are named—Barnabas, Symeon Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen, and Saul (Acts 13:1)—from among whom Barnabas and Saul were selected for a special apostolic embassy (cf. Acts 14:4). Again, Judas Barsabbas and Silas, who were sent from Jerusalem to Antioch to convey to the church there the decision of the apostolic council as to

the terms on which gentiles might be admitted to membership, were prophets (Acts 15:32). Their function in virtue of their office was evidently to persuade and to preach: "Judas and Silas, being themselves also prophets, exhorted the brethren with many words and confirmed them."

Once more, in the Apocalypse we find that prophets occupy a prominent place in the writer's vision of the church. The second "beast," Satan's coadjutor with the horns of a lamb and the voice of a dragon, who works signs and lying wonders, is described as pre-eminently "the False Prophet" (Rev. 13:11-14; 16:13, etc.). And in this Judeo-Christian book there is no mention of "bishops" or "deacons," nor of "presbyters," save the four and twenty who are before the throne (Rev. 4:4, etc.); but "apostles" and "prophets" are bidden to rejoice with the "saints" (Rev. 18:20). It is the blood of "saints" and of "prophets" that is avenged at last (Rev. 16:6; 18:24) when reward is to be given to "thy servants the prophets and to the saints" (Rev. 11:18). As "the saints" is the regular expression for the faithful in Christ, as in Pauline usage, so those who minister to them are uniformly described as prophets. And the seer of the Apocalypse counts himself also as a *προφήτης* (Rev. 22:9, "thy brethren the prophets"). The witness of this book thus entirely confirms our view of the important position which the "prophet" occupied in the earliest Christian communities.

When we pass into the sub-apostolic age, we find that there is a growing tendency for the itinerant ministry of apostles and prophets to be replaced by a local ministry of bishops and deacons. This latter is fully established at Corinth, and apparently at Rome, when Clement wrote his epistle to the Corinthians (about the year 97); and Clement tells us nothing about Christian prophecy. In Asia Minor in the days of Ignatius the monarchical episcopate is fully organized, and the only hint of the prophetic office in his epistles is in a passage where Ignatius speaks of the possibility of a direct revelation from God coming to him (*Eph.*, § 20), thus apparently regarding himself as a prophet. But it is in the *Didache*, or "Teaching of the Twelve Apostles"—a manual which in its present form goes back to the year 120 or thereabouts—that we gain the clearest view of the high estimation in which the Christian prophets were held. Rules are

laid down (§§ 10-15) for the welcome to be accorded to an apostle—i. e., a missionary—or a prophet when he visited a little community of Christians. He is to be entertained for two days at most, but one asking to be fed and lodged for a longer time is to be regarded as a false prophet. So, too, if he asks for money as his reward, or if his conduct does not agree with his words, he is to be rejected. But a genuine prophet, speaking in the spirit, is to be treated with veneration, and his message is to be received without questioning. The injunction is added: "Permit the apostles and prophets to offer thanksgiving as much as they desire;" a rule which probably means (as will be seen if the context is examined) that the prophet is not bound to use the regular eucharistic prayers, but that he may pray *ex tempore*, as the phrase now is, at the celebration of the mysteries. And, finally, we have a hint of the gradual assumption of the prophetic office by the permanent officials of the church: "Appoint for yourselves therefore bishops and deacons worthy of the Lord, men who are meek and not lovers of money and also true and approved; for unto you they also perform the service of the prophets and teachers." Here we see that spiritual functions are beginning to be provided for by a local ministry, as ordinary gifts begin to supersede extraordinary ones. The period of transition lasted longer in some places than in others. Justin Martyr just hints at the existence of Christian prophets in his time, although he seems to suggest that they were rarely to be met with: "Among us even to the present day there are prophetic gifts" are his words (*Dial.* § 82). But the prevalence of Montanism in certain quarters at the end of the second century shows how profound was the unwillingness of some to admit that the prophetic office had become obsolete.¹

We have thus to recognize that the prophet was a person held in quite peculiar estimation in the early Christian church. His gifts were those suitable to a period of transition and of spiritual revival, and when his work was accomplished he gave place to the official leaders of the church whom we call bishops and deacons. Like the office of presbyter, the office of prophet was emphatically Jewish in its conception and in its origin, and in this as in other respects was contrasted with the office of bishop.

¹ See Eusebius, *H. E.*, 5:16, 17, for further mention of "prophets."

But the need for the prophet arises again and again in Christian history; and he must be blind to its teachings who does not recognize that again and again the man has been sent to supply the need. Francis of Assisi, the prophet of unworldliness; Savonarola, the prophet of liberty; Luther, the prophet of the divine compassion, whose central thought is that of the love of God in Christ; Wesley, Maurice, Newman, and all that goodly fellowship to whom it has been given by God to speak burning words of truth for him—these men are indeed prophets to their age and to posterity of the manifold grace of God. And in every age of Christian history their mission has been the same as that of the first prophet of the gospel age—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord. They go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways.